

IS PROHIBITION A NATIONAL BENEFIT

*A Frank Discussion of Conditions
as They Are and as They Were*

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THE QUESTION is not, "Is prohibition producing the millennium?" It is not, "Is prohibition the best of all possible laws in the best of all possible lands?" The question is simpler than that—"Is prohibition a national benefit, or is it not?" That is to say, Are American life and conditions on the whole better for the present and more hopeful for the future because prohibition has been enacted? Let us hold our thought to this simple and limited theme.

Are the Facts of Yesterday Forgotten?

The question, of necessity, involves a comparison, and in the first place a comparison with the past. We are not asking whether prohibition is equal to heaven hereafter. We are asking rather whether it is an improvement on America heretofore; and whether therefore it may be believed that we are moving forward to something still better along the road on

which we have begun. Our capacity for forgetting the facts of yesterday, especially when a blurred memory serves the purpose of argument, is great. Opponents of prohibition are often found attacking present conditions with an excitement which would seem to carry the idea that the old conditions were more or less ideal. One might imagine that in those former blessed days when a saloon stood on every other corner there was no drunkenness, no domestic misery and degradation; that there were no police courts full of besotted men and women, no jails full of drunkards, and no penitentiaries where men went for crimes committed when they were drunk. One might suppose that in those days there was no drinking in college fraternities, that all the young people were completely sober, and that society generally was paradise. Let us go back, we are told, to the good old days of abundant supply, and we shall have again an admirable sobriety. If only we will welcome again affectionately the old regime, all will be well.

"Leave but a kiss within the cup
And I'll not ask for wine."

But distance and the exigencies of debate have lent enchantment to a view which, when we actually begin to remember facts, becomes a different matter.

Vice Conditions in the Cities

Have we really forgotten the conditions in America which brought prohibition? Have we forgotten what the streets in our cities looked like with saloons dotted along every block where the population

was most crowded? Have we forgotten the newspapers with half - pages and whole pages devoted to liquor advertising? Have we forgotten the sordid and pitiful dramas which then were enacted every day in juvenile courts, in the night courts, and in every police court into which came the muddy stream of social wreckage that flowed from the saloons? The Chicago Vice Report was the first of the epoch-making social studies in America into the condition of our cities. It was published in 1911, and any one who will turn back to it now will understand what those factors were, with regard to liquor and the liquor trade in America, which created that tidal wave of indignation leading to prohibition. Says that report:

"In the Commission's consideration and investigation of the Social Evil, it found that the most conspicuous and important element in connection with the same, next to the house of prostitution itself, was the saloon, and the most important financial interest, next to the business of prostitution, was the liquor interest. As a contributory influence to immorality and the business of prostitution there is no interest so dangerous and so powerful in the city of Chicago."

Saloons Allied with Commercialized Vice

Then follows the long and detailed evidence of the unmistakable and disgusting alliance, true not only in Chicago but in other American cities, between the saloons and the liquor trade behind them, on the one hand, and commercialized vice, the seduction of women and girls, and the wide network of police corrup-

tion and sordid politics on the other. The saloons then and through all their history were chief factors in the power of the worst ward leaders in the political rings of our American cities. And how many saloons were in Chicago at the time when the report of the Vice Commission, which afterward was repeated in other American cities, was made? Seven thousand, one hundred and fifty-two (7,152), or one saloon to every three hundred men, women and children in the population of the entire city.

Not Merely Benevolent Poor Men's Clubs

Let it be remembered also that these saloons were not merely benevolent poor men's clubs, as some would have us imagine, owned and kept by some benevolent friend of his neighbors. The saloons in vast numbers had been bought up and were controlled by the wholesale brewers and other huge organizations of liquor manufacturers. Those saloons were conducted for the deliberate purpose of increasing by every means possible the sale and consumption of liquor, and in that purpose every law and regulation was impudently flouted. Furthermore, by wholesale advertising, and by doing their utmost to multiply through the saloons the army of drinkers, the commercialized liquor interests actually succeeded, in a quarter of a century, in increasing the *per capita* consumption of liquor in America from ten gallons to twenty-three gallons a year.

THE OLD-TIME SALOON

Charles Stelzle was born on the East Side of New York, and his subsequent work as an expert social investigator is built, not upon theory, but upon experience. This is what he writes about prohibition in that fascinating autobiography called "A Son of the Bowery":

The Old Saloon, a Distinct Menace!

"Prohibition was not adopted because some long-haired men, and women who bobbed their hair before it became popular—fanatics—not wanting to drink themselves, did not want anybody else to drink. Prohibition was brought about because large numbers of the nearly two hundred thousand saloons and places where liquor was sold in this country had become a distinct menace. They disregarded the law. They sold to minors. They sold to inebriates. They sold on Sunday. They harbored crooks, blacklegs, prostitutes, gamblers, and every sort of disreputable people. They entered politics and controlled our municipal life. Attempts were made to reform them through high license, low license, and local option and model saloons, but none of these seemed to work.

"During all these processes the saloonkeepers and mainly the brewers, who owned 75 per cent of the saloons, laughed at the public and ridiculed every attempt to wipe out the evils in connection with the business until finally the people became tired of the entire outfit and voted it out of existence"

The Saloon or Its Equivalent Necessary for Any Sale of Liquor

I am aware that the opponents of prohibition say that of course they do not

want the saloon back again, and that to talk of the evils of the saloon is to talk beside the question. But it is not beside the question. For, in the first place, there is yet to be shown any method by which the sale of liquor, or of some kinds of liquor, could be reintroduced without bringing back the saloon or its equivalent. And in the second place a true memory of what the saloon meant has immediate bearing as a corrective for that sometimes hysterical impatience with which people treat today the imperfections of our unfinished social experiment.

Prohibition came to this country because an increasing, and at length an overwhelming, number of its men and women were sick and disgusted at the social degradation wrought by a huge commercial interest with which contemptuous indifference to human welfare was entrenched by business and political powers to capitalize human appetite for its own gain

National Opposition to Liquor Traffic Began Hundred Years Ago

It is often said—so often, indeed, that the smooth phrase has acted like a narcotic on some people, so that in regard to it they have ceased to think—that prohibition was “slipped over.” “Slipped over!” The first conference of a nation-wide effort to oppose the liquor traffic met in Boston a little more than a hundred years ago. The question has been agitated from that time to this. Its strength at first was

wholly among the men and women who were concerned with the moral aspects and results; but to their side, in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, rallied other forces. It was perceived that in our whole industrialized civilization, with delicate machines to be tended, with automobiles on the highways, and transcontinental trains running sixty miles an hour, the community could not take chances with men whose minds were fogged and whose nerves and muscular reactions were made uncertain by alcohol.

THE MATTER OF HEALTH

Medical science also, through its laboratory investigations, began to make unmistakable the evidence that alcohol, even in small doses, is a physiological detriment. The life insurance companies, by their avoidance of drinkers among their risks, added their testimony to the fact of the damage which traced back to the liquor trade. Because of these forces together, growing hostility against drink and the drink trade was steadily pressing forward the line of its siege. First, there were local option laws. Then began the movement for state-wide prohibition. Then came the Webb-Kenyon Act, making illegal the shipment of liquor from a wet state into a dry one. Year by year the steady and unrelenting pressure went on. Year by year more people in America were outraged at the spirit and method of the liquor trade. Still the brewers and distillers refused to see the handwriting on the wall. They merely fought the

growing public conscience at every point and had no more constructive policy than an irritable insistence on being let alone. No partial regulation which was enacted was regarded by those who promoted the liquor trade. The community which had voted the saloons out was invaded by the community across its line. The dry state was deluged with mail-order liquor from adjacent great cities. Finally, as has been said, not by some leader in an anti-saloon organization, but by one of the authoritative scholars in America, Edward A. Ross, Professor of Sociology in the University of Wisconsin:

Liquor Traffic Would Respect No Law

"A long and variegated experience with attempts to regulate the liquor traffic showed that it was incapable of being made decent and law-abiding. It would respect no law, heed no warning or protests. Always it was secretly digging under or insolently breaking over any bounds the community set to it. So, not out of a sour resentment of other people's pleasures, but out of bitter experience with an unmitigated social evil, grew the sentiment for destroying it, 'root and branch.' When parents and other earnest people realized that here was a sinister thing doing its utmost to ensnare our boys and ravel out the fabric of sound principles and good resolutions which home and school and church had been at such pains to weave into the soul of youth, they hardened their hearts and struck it down."

Public Will Hardened Against It

Not without warning did the people strike it down. As early as 1914 the House

of Representatives in Congress had given a majority vote for the submission of national prohibition to the people. Month by month the movement gained strength. It still might have been postponed but for the consistent stupidity of the liquor interests themselves. In 1917 they succeeded in defeating the bill for war-time prohibition which would have given national prohibition an experimental stage before its enactment into the Constitution, and it was the reaction among their constituents which compelled the Congress which at first had voted against prohibition to submit the whole matter of the Constitutional Amendment to the people. Still its enemies and half-hearted friends did not realize the power of the public will which had been hardened against the liquor traffic. They succeeded in attaching to the amendment an unprecedented condition—that unless it were ratified within seven years it would be void. But in a swiftness of time unprecedented in American constitutional history, scarcely more than a year, the Legislatures of three-quarters of the states had ratified the Amendment and ten more ratified it after that.

Prohibition Came Slowly and Steadily

In such manner was this long siege of a century “slipped over.” It is a curious tribute to the intelligence of the American people, if it is supposed that they were blindly unaware of the tidal wave which for a hundred years was rolling in with the thunder of its deepening waters

upon the stubborn but crumbling entrenchments of the legalized liquor trade. "Slipped over," because at the moment of the enactment of the Amendment America was at war and some of her soldiers were overseas! But the Congress which ultimately passed the Amendment was elected before America was even at war. And through what bland assumption is it argued that men who had helped to elect that Congress, with the liquor issue for a generation a factor in the elections in every state, must all of a sudden be counted as a block of voters who, if only they had been here, would have opposed what Congress did?

Thus came prohibition, slowly, steadily, but at last crushingly, like the mounting and breaking of a wave.

Statistics Sometimes Misleading

What now are the effects of prohibition? Here we might enter into that deadly realm of statistics which of all methods of argument can be most misleading. Statistics may be used by debaters like a club, and their hearers can not come close enough to the figures which they brandish, or analyze them sufficiently, to see that the club is often stuffed. Statistics can be gathered to show the lamentable effects of prohibition. Statistics equally challenging can be marshaled in its support. One might read, for example, the statistics with which Professor Irving Fisher begins his book, "Prohibition at Its Worst," and note that in such a city as New York, which certainly is not a fa-

vorable example for prohibition, the arrests for first offenders (which is the real test as to the effect of prohibition on the generation now growing up in America) had decreased from twenty-four in every ten thousand of population in 1914 to only six in every ten thousand of population in 1925.

Careful Surveys Made

But I do not wish to lead into this maze of detailed figures which are bound to be confusing. For clear consideration, it is sufficient to mark the plain conclusions of the most careful surveys which have been made. That of the Federal Council of the Churches, issued in 1925, frankly recognized the difficulties of the situation, but advocated the maintenance of the present law and its genuine enforcement. Two years later, in 1927, the National Federation of Settlements made a study of the results of prohibition, assisted by social workers not only in the United States but in other countries, and published their conclusions in a notable work, "Does Prohibition Work?" The final words in that book are these:

Does Prohibition Work?

"Wherever there is a Nordic-American population which for several generations has not been in close contact with the newer immigrations or the cosmopolitanism of the great cities, there prohibition works. This is true in general in the South and in Maine and in parts of the Mississippi Valley. Wherever there are large unassimilated foreign populations accustomed to the making and use of alcoholic drinks and also an eager market for

their product, as in the great ports and the industrial cities, there the law is halting and veering and difficult to apply.

"But the reports do show that all the things hoped for by the advocates of prohibition are being realized in some places, and that even where the law is least observed, some of them have come true."

Boys and Girls Growing Up Without Knowledge of Saloon

From the statistics of the counters and compilers, I would turn rather to the statistics of common sense. Is it better to have saloons on nearly every corner of American towns and cities, or is it better to have those saloons gone, as they are gone now? Do you see people drunk on the streets as you used to do? Does it mean nothing to you that your boys and girls have a chance to grow up in a country where the solicitation of the bar-room is no longer confronting their eyes? Do you know of any railroad or great industrial corporation which would like to have the saloon again at its gates? And if it is not true that the conditions all over this country, taken by and large, produce upon the minds of its people the impression that America is better off with prohibition than she would be without it, will some opponent of the Amendment be willing to explain why, in spite of all the noise of the great metropolitan newspapers in the unreconciled cities, and the constant propaganda to overthrow prohibition, there remains the stubborn fact that every Congress elected since 1920 has refused to consider any amendment of the prohibition law, and that neither

great political party has tried, or is likely to try, to go before the electorate with a demand for change?

PROHIBITION IS NOT TO BLAME

I know, of course, that there has been disgraceful lawlessness in America in reference to prohibition, and that such lawlessness is a sinister and dangerous fact in our national life. But I challenge the assertion that this lawlessness is due to prohibition. It is due to deeper causes which have infected the spirit of the American people and which are evident in relation not to one law but to many. We have been in an ugly backwash which followed the intense exaltation of the great war. It is not prohibition which has been responsible for those shameful betrayals of the public interest which have stained our recent history. It was not prohibition which arranged the sale of Teapot Dome; and it was not prohibition which kept the facts about that transaction so long and so industriously hidden. It is reasonable to believe that more than one disappointment in American life is due, not to the existence of laws, but to the lack of the kind of governmental morale which puts laws into effect. If it were really true that it is the existence of laws that is responsible for lawlessness, then let us conclude that the laws against assassination should be repealed because they provoke gunmen, that the laws against corrupt political contributions should be repealed because political treasuries may find them inconvenient, that the laws safeguarding property should give way to Communism be-

cause the existing status of property creates the I. W. W. When gentlemen in our time are willing to follow these matters out logically, then there may be consistency in saying that the law of prohibition ought to be repealed because it is resisted. But the real truth is plain enough. What we need is not a surrender, either at one point or another, to defiant lawlessness. What we need is a reawakening of the moral vigor of America which can see to it that the process of the people's will shall be carried into effect. I do not sympathize with Billy Sunday's theology, but I like the shrewd insight which he often has into human facts, and those citizens of America today who think that they are entitled to nullify the prohibition law because they hold that it has moved in a wrong direction may well listen to Mr. Sunday's homely retort.

Somebody said to him,

"Billy, you are all right, but the trouble with you is that you are always rubbing people's fur the wrong way."

"No, I don't rub their fur the wrong way," he replied. "I rub it the right way. Let the cat turn around."

"The New Emancipation Law"

Here in America we are engaged in one of the greatest social experiments of all time. If it had not been granted before, certainly under present conditions it will be granted now, that this experiment has moral implications also. It was conceived and born out of the growing conviction in America that the manufacture and sale of alcoholic liquor produced in this

nation an economic loss, a human degradation, and a widespread poison of political and social corruption which outweighed any imaginable benefit which could come from it. To destroy that evil and to set the nation free from its results, the people of this country enacted what I like to think of as the law, not of prohibition, but of the new emancipation. And now we are faced with the question as to whether or not there is sufficient civic termination in America to see that we shall remain emancipated not only from the old grip of the liquor traffic, but from all those forces, some of them hidden and sinister, which are willing to break down this or any other law in their defiant anarchy.

THE ENGLISH POINT OF VIEW

The eyes of the world are upon this experiment of ours. There is no greater name in the financial world than that of Sir George Paish, the head of the Commission of economic experts who recently came from England to the United States. In answer to a letter of mine, inquiring about a speech which he made while he was in the United States, I received from him this letter, written in his own hand:

"DEAR MR. BOWIE,

"I am sorry to say that I have no copy of my speech at Brooklyn. My addresses are made without notes of any kind.

"It is true that very large numbers of people in this country are watching America's experiment not only with interest but with sympathy and hope. If it is successful they intend to do all that lies in their power to induce the British people to follow America's

example. No custom is more injurious to the British people than that of consuming alcohol either to excess or in moderation. It will never be possible to abolish poverty from our land until we abolish alcohol. The efforts which are made to improve the condition of the submerged section of our people by education and by social reforms are largely neutralized by the effects of alcohol. Against the improved condition of great numbers has to be placed the deterioration which alcohol causes in every rank and class.

"Personally I am convinced that if America can persuade her people to have nothing to do with alcohol and her present law becomes really effective because it is accepted, we on this side may hope to be equally successful in persuading the British people to abandon a custom that is responsible more than any other for an infinite amount of mental as well as physical suffering and for a large proportion of the poverty which now exists.

"Sincerely yours,

"GEORGE PAISH."

International Implications

Thus it is plain that this great social adventure which we call prohibition has wide international implications. It has deep and immediate consequences also for the life and spirit of this nation. The morale of America and our ability to carry through to right success a policy deliberately adopted by the electorate are at stake. It is no time to swerve in this matter because the opposition gathers. If the crosswinds of resistance blow, and the ship of this high adventure seems to be driven partly out of its course, that is no reason for cutting the rudder ropes. It is reason rather for a firmer grip to keep the rudder true.

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